

30 YEARS OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROGRESS



Clean Water Act creates loan fund for sewage treatment upgrades • Washups of medical and other waste close NJ by six states and three countries • Yucca Mountain, NV selected as the nation's radioactive waste disposal site

COMMUNITIES

“Protecting our environment means protecting the places where we live every day.”

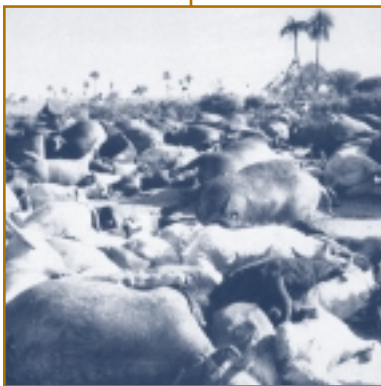
-Carol M. Browner

It happened without warning, early in the morning of December 3, 1984. A leak. Caused, like so many industrial accidents, by a series of mechanical and human failures. But this leak was like no other. The cloud of methyl isocyanate released from Union Carbide's pesticide plant blew across Bhopal, India, like the angel of death. Two thousand people died immediately. Another 8,000 died later. Health officials, ill-informed about chemicals at the factory, were completely unprepared for the tragedy.

Could Bhopal happen here? Congressional hearings that followed the accident revealed that U.S. companies routinely discharged hazardous chemicals into the air, while emergency planners knew little about the potential for disaster at local industrial facilities.

The result was the passage of the Emergency Planning and Community Right-To-Know Act of 1986, requiring companies to provide public information about their potentially toxic chemicals. At the same time, states were required to establish Emergency Planning Districts and committees to prepare for any emergency - a

Photo Credit: AP/World Wide Photos



1984: Death cloud sweeps Bhopal, India

fire, an explosion, a flood - that might result in the release of chemicals into the environment.

Right-to-know is critical to protecting the health of communities. Knowing what chemicals are present allows emergency responders to obtain the right protective gear and equipment to contain a release. Evacuation plans can be in place and local hospitals and clinics can be prepared to treat people affected by a release.

EPA has expanded TRI - the Toxic Release Inventory - so that companies must now report more than 640 individually listed toxic chemicals and chemical categories. On Earth Day 1997, EPA Administrator Carol Browner increased by some 30 percent the number of industrial

facilities required to make public their levels of toxic chemical emissions. Today, over 31,000 facilities report toxic emissions to the public, community by community.

EPA aggressively enforces right-to-know reporting. To further improve community protection, violators are frequently given the option of reducing monetary penalties by purchasing

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Garbage handling raises environmental justice concerns.

emergency response equipment and providing training in the communities involved.

Low-income communities and communities of color often bear more than their share of society's environmental problems. The concept of "environmental justice" addresses the concern that these communities are home to too many sewage treatment plants, waste transfer stations and facilities, highways or industries that emit large amounts of pollutants. President Clinton signed an Executive Order in 1994 ordering all federal agencies to consider environmental justice whenever they do business. In addition to ensuring that environmental regulations are fairly and equally enforced in all communities, EPA provides educational and financial support to help communities identify and address environmental injustice.

An example is a \$16,000 grant made in 1999 to the Comité Pro Costa Ventana, Inc. in Guayanilla, Puerto Rico. For years, residents expressed concern that pesticides drifting from a Tropical Fruit Company farm were affecting their health - and particularly the health of local children. EPA has taken legal action to restrict spraying and establish buffer zones between the farm and the community. The Comité is translating and distributing technical literature and data and hosting workshops to help residents advocate more effectively for the protection of human health.

Low-income communities have higher incidences of environmental health problems. Asthma - especially childhood asthma - is a major concern. Despite vast improvements in outdoor air quality, asthma rates continue to skyrocket, especially in

minority and low-income areas. Asthma accounts for one-third of all pediatric emergency room visits and the incidence of asthma is rising more rapidly in preschool-aged children than in any other age group. It is the number one cause of missed school, causing over 10 million missed school days per year. And when kids miss school, parents miss work.

It's estimated that 20% of the children in Newark have asthma. EPA has selected Newark's Ironbound section to be one of 11 nationwide "Child Health Champion Campaign" pilots. "Asthma Busters" will be trained to raise community awareness about asthma triggers in the home environment - cigarette smoke, dust mites, pets, molds and cockroaches. Other projects include indoor allergen studies in the Cataño and Rio Grande/Loiza sections of Puerto Rico and educational

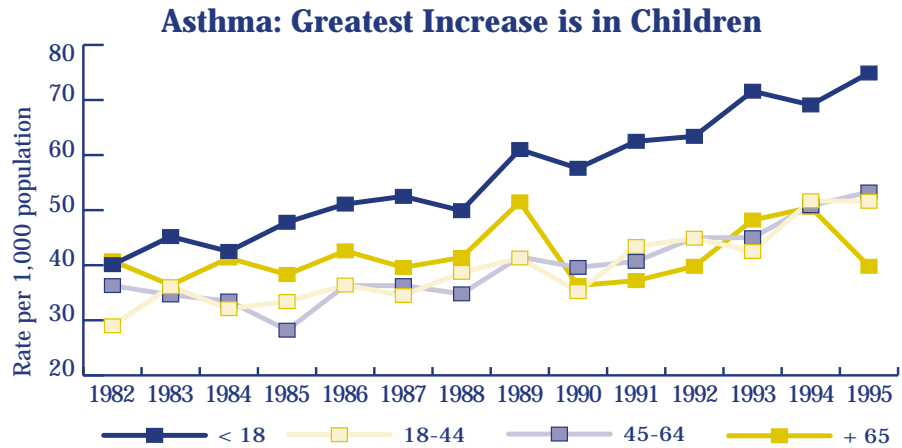


Pesticide drift is a concern when people live downwind.

outreach in Camden, New Jersey and Hunts Point and East and West Harlem in New York City.

These same children are also at increased risk of lead poisoning, which affects intellectual and behavioral growth in young children. Lead was banned for use in paint and plumbing, but the widespread use of lead paint prior to the 1970s left enormous quantities of lead in roughly three-quarters of America's housing. Chipping and peeling paint are obvious problems, but the lead dust created by opening and closing old windows can also poison a child. There are no symptoms of low-level lead poisoning. All young children living in older housing should be tested.

Abating lead paint is costly, making education and prevention all the more important. EPA requires that people buying and renting or remodeling homes be told about known lead problems and be given the right to test for lead paint. Improperly removing lead paint - by sanding, burning or sandblasting - can put people at risk of acute lead poisoning. Sandblasting incidents from Bedford Hills, New York to Short Hills, New Jersey have turned homes and surrounding property into virtual toxic waste sites.

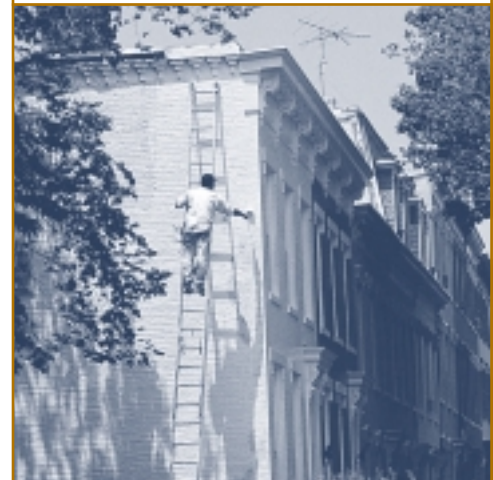


EPA also recommends that homes be tested for radon. Radon is second only to cigarette smoke in causing lung cancer. It is an invisible, odorless gas that emanates from certain types of rock and soil and can build up in lower levels of a home. While most homes won't have a radon problem, the test is simple and inexpensive, and there are straightforward ways to remove radon buildups where they exist.

Community health decisions often involve questions of risk. In 1999, when the New York Metropolitan area was threatened by the West Nile virus and seven people died, health officials used pesticides to combat disease-carrying mosquitos. EPA works to ensure that states and localities reduce human risks from pesticides by applying them properly.

Before a company can sell or distribute a pesticide, EPA

reviews studies to determine that it will not pose unreasonable risks to human health or the environment. The Agency also sets limits on how much pesticide may be used on food during growing and processing and how much pesticide residue can remain on food. Recognizing that pesticides registered in the past may not meet today's safety standards, EPA is reviewing older pesticides and taking action to reduce risks where appropriate.



Old lead paint is a hazard to children.